

A Bolt from the Blue

When your music-making falls outside standard genres, you have to try that much harder to make yourself heard. That's the situation that **Corky Siegel** finds himself in with his **Chamber Blues** ensemble, featuring Siegel, on blues harmonica, with a pianist, a string quartet and an East Indian percussionist. The group serves up a musical menu that you won't find elsewhere—Siegel's own compositions in "chamber blues" style—as he puts it, "a compositional approach that juxtaposes blues and classical style in a chamber music setting."

The roots of Siegel's classical/blues mix date back to the sixties. Those were the days of the Siegel-Schwall band, featuring Siegel and guitarist Jim Schwall. "We were playing in this club on the North Side [of Chicago], and this Japanese fellow used to come in night after night," Siegel recalls. "One night he comes up to me and says 'Corky, I'd like your band to jam with my band.'" The "Japanese fellow," it turned out, was Seiji Ozawa and his "band" was the Chicago Symphony. The invitation resulted in a groundbreaking collaboration on William Russo's *Three Pieces for Blues Band and Symphony Orchestra*; later, a recording of the work became one of Deutsche Grammophon's best-selling albums ever.

"I'm composing what in my mind is classical-flavored music," says Siegel. The problem, though, can be getting presenters to understand it as he does. "There's a resistance in communication for people who have no idea what it is," he says. "Once they experience it, though, it's a whole different thing." He cites the Aspen Music Festival as a venue that was initially resistant to Chamber Blues, but has now brought the ensemble back for return engagements.

As Siegel sees it, all that audience members—and presenters—need is a pair of ears

and an open mind. To illustrate his point, he tells a story from an after-concert Q&A in the Midwest. "One person stood up and said 'I'm a classical purist, yet I love chamber blues. How do you explain that?'" Siegel relates. "I said 'You're *not* a classical purist. That's not an artistic statement; it's a *sociopolitical* statement.'"

The Chamber Blues concert, Siegel says, had encouraged that listener to abandon her preexisting understanding of her own musical taste. "When you're confronted with the beauty of art," he says, "there *is* no purism."

www.chamberblues.com



CHAMBER JAZZ: BACK ROW, L TO R, AURELIEN PEDERZOLI, VIOLIN; JILL KAEDING, CELLO; DOYLE ARMBRUST, VIOLA. FRONT ROW: CORKY SIEGEL, HARMONICA, PIANO, VOCALS, COMPOSITIONS; CHIHSUAN YANG, VIOLIN; FRANK DONALDSON, TABLAS AND WORLD PERCUSSION